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Review

Nick Srnicek, and Alex Williams (2015) *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a world without work*, Verso: London, paperback, 272 pages, ISBN: 1784786225, £9.99

Introduction: The phenomenon of ‘accelerationism’

My desire to read ‘Inventing the future’ emerged after happening upon a short provocation called the ‘Accelerationist Manifesto’, also written by this book’s authors (political theorist Nick Srnicek and sociologist Alex Williams) in 2013. These are both polemical works which, whilst not directly about education, surface a number of debates pertinent to educators working for social justice. Accelerationism—a peculiar mix of sci-fi and political theory—starts from the premise that a moribund left must learn to let go of its anachronistic tendencies (the authors label these tendencies ‘folk politics’), by counter-intuitively embracing the breakneck speed of life and labour under neoliberal techno-capitalism. This, as I understand it, is a speculative response to capitalism’s ‘moving contradiction’ of labour, ‘both source of value, and squeezed out by the machine’ (Noys, 2014, p. 97), which it attempts to burst through by embracing full-automation as one necessary condition of a post-capitalist, post-work utopia.

Critics have variously charged ‘accelerationism’ with techno-fetishism, technocratic tendencies, and a Eurocentric hubris (Gardiner, 2017, p. 35). In addition to these concerns, Noys (2014) sees the metaphor of acceleration as a kind of libidinal fantasy, emerging from a context where neoliberal capitalism is actually stagnating. At this point, it is pertinent to note the difference between the ‘pseudo-dynamism’ of life under neoliberalism (Gardiner, 2017, p. 34) and techno-social acceleration, as such. The former condition sees cultural stagnation as a super-structural symptom of late capitalism, where the *quantity* of cultural production is untethered from any limits in cyberspace, yet *qualitatively* limited by the fleshy limitations of human producers. This is a world of cognitive and affective depletion; where superhero film remakes are

endlessly regurgitated; where work/life distinctions collapse with the omnipresence of smartphones and tablets; where the future is abandoned to the frenetic standstill of the present. What really seems to be at stake in the authors' work, and what is reflected more accurately in the title of their full-length book, is how we push thought in new directions, and thereby go about 'inventing the future.'

'Inventing the future': The central arguments

'Inventing the future' is a more well-rounded manifesto, albeit still keyed to political demands for full automation and Universal Basic Income (UBI) in order "that marginalised groups have the time and energy to engage more effectively in counter-hegemonic politics" (Gardiner, 2017, pp. 30-31) and pursue the 'Good Life', through the elimination of drudgery:

Learning a musical instrument, reading literature, socializing with friends and playing sports all involve varying degrees of effort - but these are things that we freely choose to do. A post-work world is therefore not a world of idleness; rather, it is a world in which people are no longer bound to jobs, but free to create their own lives. (Srnicek and Williams, 2015, pp. 85-6)

Read in this way, 'accelerationism' seems to be a misnomer, and it is pertinent to note that the label doesn't really feature at all in the book-length exposition of their manifesto for a post-work future. In fact, the authors argue that the techno-utopian post-work consensus they envision is first and foremost a *political project* achievable only through sustained long-term hegemonic struggle to build a strong popular movement. 'There is no technocratic solution', as they state on page 127.

The justification for the authors' manifesto leans heavily on their analysis of surplus populations (meaning those surplus to the requirements of neoliberal capitalism), and the ways in which technology is increasingly complicit in rendering human workers redundant. The authors draw on available data to argue that the global surplus

population significantly outnumbers the global working class (p. 91). Through this analysis, Williams and Srnicek (2015, pp. 188-9) attempt to map out:

... systemic connections between phenomena like the deadly functions of borders (see pp. 101-2), the violent management of jobless neighbourhoods (see pp. 102-3), the hyper-exploitation of prison labour (pp. 90, 103), the continuation of outright slavery (p. 90), the rising density of informal slums (pp. 96-8), the proliferation of suicides and mental health issues (p. 94), the attacks on higher education (p. 99), and the devastating effects of a world becoming post-industrial (ibid., pp. 97-8).

It is therefore important to note that Williams and Srnicek don't reductively blame technology for the creation of a global surplus population. Rather, they attempt to work through the ways in which technological change is entangled with 'primitive accumulation' and 'logics of exclusion', based on institutionalized racism and sexism. This analysis underpins their view that a post-work settlement might offer a possible emancipatory 'response to existing and emerging neocolonial, racist, sexist and exploitative conditions' (ibid., p. 189).

To be specific, their manifesto is comprised of four minimal demands:

full automation, reduction of the working week, provision of a basic income and diminishment of the work ethic. I'll leave it to readers to appraise the authors' treatment of, and rationale for, these separate demands, which space prevents me from unpacking. Approximately, they argue that the myth of full employment functions as an ideological justification for punitive welfare regimes designed to control surplus populations, and that

the traditional battle cry of the left, demanding full employment, should be replaced with a battle cry for full unemployment. (ibid., p. 127)

What interested me most about these demands were their implications for the importance and purpose of education. Education scholars and critical educators have produced similar analyses, but few have been able to push beyond critique and speculate on the consequences of what a break with neoliberalism would actually mean in a circumstance where returning to Westphalian social democratic compromise is no longer an option. I move on to address this below.

Implications for educators

The central aim of this book is rediscovering the ‘glimmers of the future’ ‘trampled and forgotten under the pressures of an increasingly precarious and demanding world’ (ibid., p. 2). If this task is unabashedly utopian, then the authors also recognise that utopian thinking is an educational task. The authors assert that ‘utopia’, as an ‘affective modulator’, ‘ultimately concerns the education of desire’, and that ‘education forms a key institution for transforming neoliberal hegemony’ (ibid., pp. 140-3).

Concretely, Srnicek and Williams think this entails ‘pluralizing the teaching of economics, reinvigorating the study of leftist economics and exploring popular economic literacy’ (ibid., p. 142). Furthermore, ‘the aim should be to spread such economics education far beyond the confines of universities’ via trade unions, open schools and a revived tradition of community-based adult education, networked together in such a way that ‘abstract economic understandings can be linked up with the on-the-ground knowledge of workers, activists and community members’ (ibid., p. 144-5).

Within this vision, community education has nothing to do with ‘widening access’ to what exists, and everything to do with being part of a wider ecology of organisations seeking to transform the educational system in order to build a new hegemony around the aforementioned demands.

When juxtaposed against the realities of contemporary practice, the scale of the challenge posed by this rendering of education swims into focus: this vision stands in

stark contrast to forms of lifelong learning and employability training, which function as the handmaidens of a punitive welfare system, justified by the myth of full-employment. Furthermore, the knowledge and skills required of such educators would have to combine ideology critique with the kinds of technical, scientific, and economic knowledge adequate to the task of planning an egalitarian post-work economy.

Criticisms and conclusion

If this utopian project entails an abandonment of anachronistic tendencies, then one thing to address is their uncharitable diagnosis of what they call the ‘folk political’ left. Folk politics denotes a cultural preference for authenticity over efficacy, for local community action and horizontal structures over complex networks and hierarchical leadership, for conceptual spontaneity over abstraction. Sometimes this comes off as a clear caricature of certain tendencies on the left, overstated for effect. Secondly, there is a danger that it could be used both as a label with which to ‘other’ those who critique their analysis, and explain away such critique, as opposed to engaging with it. However, in the Afterword the authors do make an effort, to respond to this critique and a number of others, including the charge of techno-fetishism and vanguardism. Again, I’ll leave it to the reader to make their own mind up about how the authors respond to their critics.

I can see it is quite possible that many readers may disagree with the analysis and point out aporias; scoff at the ‘folk politics’ label; find the arrogance of unexamined privilege in its universalist ambitions. And all of these critiques may be valid. However, to me, what is valuable in this book is that it represents one attempt to push political thought beyond what Nancy Fraser (2017, p. 41) has recently termed the ‘Hobson’s Choice’ between ‘progressive neoliberalism’ (a precarious historical settlement between the demands of new social movements and contemporary capitalism) and the ‘reactionary populism’ currently manifested worldwide. The book’s worth should be measured as a function of the extent to which, in spite of its limitations, it is able to act as a catalyst for new ways of thinking that are urgently needed.

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